

## **Too Heavy+Too Fast=Three Dead**

U.S. ARMY COMBAT READINESS CENTER

**It was early on a Monday morning when five Soldiers, all assigned to the same unit, piled into one Soldier's car for the drive to a major airport in an adjacent state. They were starting block leave and eager to catch their flights home. The Soldiers jammed five duffle bags into the trunk and got inside the vehicle, holding additional luggage on their laps or on the floorboards between their feet.**

Although the car was a mid-size luxury model, the Soldiers had exceeded its load limitations. With three people in the backseat and more than 350 pounds of luggage in the trunk, the vehicle's weight distribution shifted toward the rear. This reduced front-tire traction and altered the vehicle's handling and stability.

The Soldiers had received a safety briefing from the rear detachment NCOIC during morning formation. The briefing addressed driving techniques, speeding, drunk driving and driving while fatigued. After they were finally released on leave, the Soldiers wasted no time getting on the road.

They had to cover a lot of miles quickly to make it to the airport on time. The state highway they started out on wasn't the best, being narrow, poorly maintained and limited to 55 mph. The intermittent rain showers they hit didn't help matters. However, as they crossed the state line, the road improved significantly. The broad, two-lane road allowed drivers to go 70 mph during daytime hours.

After a brief stop at a gas station, the five Soldiers got back on the road and headed west toward the city where the airport was located. The road was wet from the occasional rain showers they were still encountering, and the driver had his lights on and his wipers going. They'd gone about eight miles when the road curved slightly to the right and descended, providing a short passing zone for westbound traffic before quickly entering a no-passing zone and an uphill grade.

While the Soldiers' vehicle was in the passing zone, another driver swept past and then swerved back into the westbound lane, cutting their car off. The Soldier driving the vehicle panicked and slammed on the brakes, causing the car to skid right and then left. As the car slid, the driver hit and released the brakes but failed to regain control.

The car slid across the oncoming lane and down an embankment before skidding across a muddy, sparsely grassed shoulder and up a slight incline into some large trees. The front passenger side hit a tree, causing the car to spin and hit another tree on the driver side. The vehicle wound up about 50 feet in a forest, far enough off the road to not be seen easily by passing traffic.

After briefly losing consciousness, the driver awoke, got out of the car, checked the other passengers and made his way to the road to get help. Two truck drivers stopped on the shoulder and went into the woods toward the crashed car. Another motorist stopped and called 911 for assistance. State troopers and emergency medical services were dispatched quickly to the accident scene, where fire department personnel used their Jaws of Life equipment to free some of the Soldiers from the badly smashed car.



The driver, who had suffered only minor injuries, was treated and taken to a local hospital. The truck drivers had gotten the driver-side rear passenger out of the vehicle and laid him on his back on the ground. Paramedics treated the Soldier for difficulty breathing and prepared him for air evacuation to a hospital.

Unfortunately, the three other Soldiers didn't survive. The right-front passenger was found a few feet from the car. He was lying prone on his door, which had been torn from the vehicle during the accident. The right-rear passenger was crushed into his door and rested in a fetal position. The rear-center passenger's feet were touching the ground through a hole that had been ripped in the right-rear passenger's floorboard. Although the five Soldiers had worn their seat belts, it wasn't enough to save all of them during this violent, high-speed crash.

## **So what killed them?**

Driver inexperience. The driver improperly applied his brakes during the accident sequence. His vehicle was equipped with anti-lock brakes, but the driver pumped them instead of applying firm, steady pressure to the pedal and steering through the situation, sending the car out of control. The vehicle's overloaded state also made it far less controllable when the driver attempted to brake. Speed. The accident occurred 101 miles into the trip, but the Soldiers had been on the road for only an hour and 10 minutes. To cover that distance in such a short time, the driver had to average a speed of 86 mph. Taking into account the stop lights in two towns along the route and the brief gas station stop, the driver must have accelerated well above 86 mph on some sections of the road. This action violated the 70-mph speed limit and also was far too fast for the wet road conditions.

## **Final thoughts**

Although seat belts and crush zones in modern vehicles can save the lives of passengers, there is a limit when speed is involved. For every increase of 10 mph, impact forces are doubled during a crash. There comes a point when no vehicle can withstand the impact and remain intact. Also, the g-forces on passengers, even those properly restrained by seat belts, can be more than the human body can survive.

The Soldier who caused this accident was properly trained and licensed and had just received a safety briefing. He has no excuse. Likewise, the passengers were responsible to speak up for their own safety but didn't. Sadly, in the end, three of them paid for that silence with their lives.